

This piece, written at the height of the Pelican Bay hunger strike, analyzes the strategic importance of prison struggles in the context of contemporary capitalism.

As we write this, thousands of inmates across California—spearheaded by an organized bloc in the Pelican Bay secure housing unit (SHU)—are refusing meals and risking their bodies and lives in the struggle to reform the atrocious conditions prevalent across the state penitentiary system. But this struggle is about more than reforming incarceration and improving conditions: the hunger strike speaks to the struggle for revolutionary change across society as a whole and offers a preliminary glimpse of the new world gestating in the hellish bowels of the old.



LUMPENIZATION & UNEMPLOYABILITY

In *Black Reconstruction*, W.E.B. Du Bois emphasized the “strategic” position of the Black slave, one which made possible the “general strike” of deserting slaves that would both transform the Civil War into a war for abolition and ensure a Northern victory. Black workers, “the ultimate exploited,” represented the “founding stone of a new economic system”: on them it stood and by their autonomous action it would come crashing down.

A century later, this picture had changed, and Black Panther founder Huey Newton took the seemingly contradictory position that Blacks were both central to and increasingly unnecessary for economic production in the United States. In 1967, he had written of Black Americans as both the “oil” without which the U.S. war machine “cannot function” and as the “driving shaft”



of that same machinery: "we are in such a strategic position in this machinery that, once we become dislocated, the functioning of the remainder of the machinery breaks down," he insisted. Black Americans, in short, "can, because of their intimacy with the mechanism, destroy the engine that is enslaving the world." But just four years later, Newton would document a growing distance between these former slaves and the "machinery" of the U.S. economy: "blacks and third world people," he argued, had become displaced from their central economic function, and were increasingly rendered what he called "the unemployables."

But for Newton, this declining economic position of the Black population did not correspond to a declining political importance. Instead, these "unemployables"—which he used as synonymous with the controversial concept of the lumpen—would become, by virtue of sheer numbers, a new revolutionary agent capable of overthrowing U.S. capitalism:

The [revolutionary] thrust will come from the growing number of what we call the "unemployables" in this society...The proletariat will become the lumpen proletariat. It is this future change--the increase of the lumpen proletariat and the decrease of the proletariat--which makes us say that the lumpen proletariat is the majority and carries the revolutionary banner ("Intercommunalism").

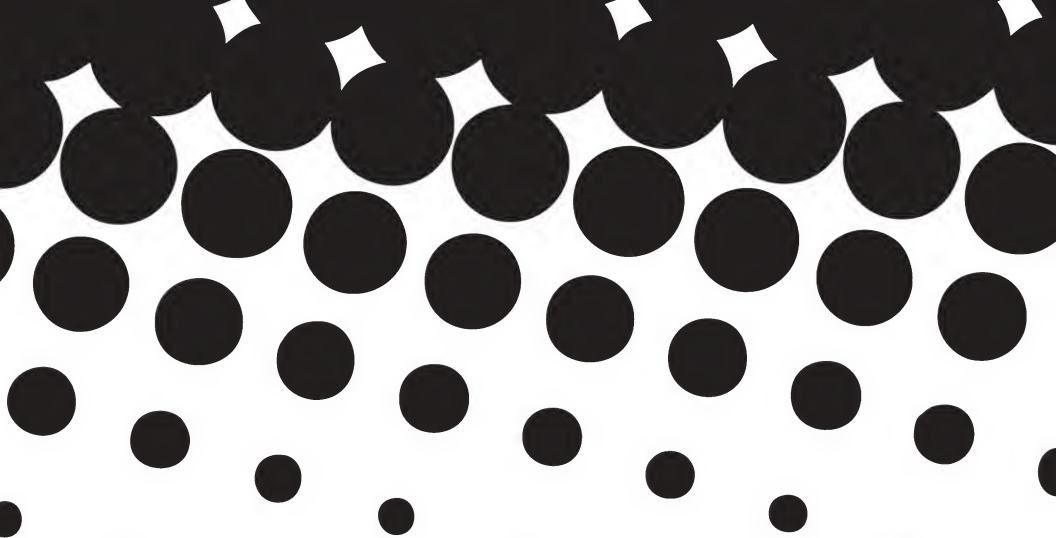
Were these two arguments in contradiction with one another, or was this shift simply a reflection of momentous economic transformation and the increasing “unemployability” of many poor Americans, specifically people of color and even more specifically the Black population? Have communities of color been increasingly “lumpenized” as Huey predicted?

Since he wrote these words, much has changed. Politically, the Black Power movement was decapitated and slaughtered through COINTELPRO orchestrated repression, only to be replaced with the spontaneously emerging self-defense units later known as “gangs.” Economically, de-industrialization accelerated and, in search of low wages and an unprotected labor force, capital began to flee en masse to both the Global South and the South of the North (the U.S. South). Increasingly “unemployable” but still needing to eat, poor and especially Black communities took the only work available: what Mike Davis has called the “South American re-employment plan. Steel was traded for heroin, later Chrysler for crack, and more generally, the point of production was displaced, in the words of Eldridge Cleaver, by “the streets.”

This broad trend toward the increasing “unemployability” of the Black population is visible not so much in the official unemployment data with which we are barraged on the daily, but in what lies behind and is obscured by that data. Officially, the Black unemployment rate

today is 16% (23% if underemployment is included), which is catastrophic enough, were it not for the fact that this number massively underestimates the reality of the present crisis and the historic tendency toward unemployability. This is because official unemployment figures only include those looking for work, and a "true" unemployment rate is often double what the official data shows.

The media today is rife with both sob stories of those who have "given up looking" and the obligatory (ideological) success story of those who had once "given up" but have now made a triumphant return to the work force. But is there reason to think that Black folks have "given up" more than their white counterparts? Is the current spike in counted and uncounted Black unemployment simply a product of the crisis, or does it represent the deeper tendency Huey Newton identified 40 years ago?



ENTER THE CARCERAL STATE

One thing has clearly changed in the 40 years since Newton penned his words, and as unemployment rates—white and Black—have periodically spiked and declined: the birth of the carceral state and the economic and political strategy of mass incarceration. And the implications of this transformation are pivotal: From the 70s to the 90s, the prison population more than tripled, reaching nearly 850,000 in 1992. And from the 90s until now it has ballooned to roughly 2,300,000 people, with Blacks making up well over 40%.

You can't look for work if you're locked up. This might sound obvious, but the implications are staggering: it means that nearly a million Black people, mostly young men, aren't counted in the unemployment figures



(which count 2.8 million unemployed Blacks). And even when released, it's damn near impossible to get work, especially for felons and parolees (according to Demico Booth, author of *Why Are So Many Black Men in Prison?*, 1.5 million Black men alone are in prison with 3.5 million either currently or formerly on parole). As Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow* recently put it: "More African-American men are in prison or jail, on probation or parole than were enslaved in 1850, before the Civil War began." This is no coincidence: it was precisely as a result of the Black Power movements and the threat of unified political action that it represented that mass incarceration emerges as a replacement for slavery and Jim Crow, with legal lynching replacing its previous extra-legal forms.

In this context, it's not surprising that some might "give up" and look for alternative forms of employment. In other words, the growth of mass incarceration masks




a very real tendency toward “unemployability,” and prisons have become warehouses for containing this rebellious class. And not just containing: with their coerced and underpaid labor and forced consumption of overpriced goods and services (commissary, jacked up phone rates), these warehouses also provide the basis for a new form of what Marx called “primitive accumulation,” in which capitalists make a killing, literally. And all the while, even official unemployment rates skyrocket, informal labor—from everyday hustling to the drug trade—become increasingly the norm, and this process of lumpenization extends to the very heart of the economy itself: the massive influx of migrant workers—which capitalists prefer to keep illegal (and therefore cheaper and unprotected)—is but the flip-side of this process.

What does this mean for resistance? If Huey Newton, Bunchy Carter, and the Black Panthers placed an emphasis on organizing among the lumpen “unemployables,” then this organizing must now transcend prison walls. And if Eldridge Cleaver located these “unemployables” and their action primarily in the street as opposed to the factory, then we must today—in the era of mass incarceration—add another location for resistance: the pen.



“VICTORY OR DEATH!”

Despite its laid-back image and unearned reputation for social consciousness, California has long represented a spearhead of this process of mass incarceration (as has Georgia, site of a prison strike last December). Holding nearly 150,000 (in only the state facilities), conditions in the severely overcrowded California prisons have reached the point that the United States Supreme Court recently upheld a lower-court ruling that even being sentenced to prison in California constitutes a “cruel and unusual punishment” and is thus unconstitutional (In his dissent, Antonin Scalia called the decision “perhaps the most radical injunction issued by a court in our nation’s history.”) Years ago, courts at different levels ordered the state to release nearly 50,000 inmates, leading then-governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to ship some 10,000 to other states. This is the immediate context of the Pelican Bay hunger strike, but its implications are far broader.





On July 1st 2011, inmates in the SHU at Pelican Bay launched a hunger strike with the following five demands:

1. An end to collective punishment, especially as relates to indefinite SHU sentences;
2. An end to the “debriefing” process by which gang status is determined (and SHU sentences issued);
3. Compliance with federal rulings with regard to long-term solitary confinement;
4. Provision of adequate and nutritious food; and
5. Provision of constructive programming and privileges, especially for those with long-term SHU sentences.

After initially denying mass participation in the hunger strike, California Prison officials admitted that some 6,600 inmates across the state were refusing meals. A small number, like Chad Landrum of the Pelican Bay SHU—who was already suffering from liver disease and diabetes—have chose to strike “indefinitely... victory or death!”

In an interview, Manuel La Fontaine of All of Us or None describes to us the immediate motivation of the strike and the inhuman conditions of the SHU:

“**T**he purpose of the SHU is to control people that are beyond control. Dignity is the last thing that a person has in prison and the SHU is designed to take that away from them. It may not be considered torture if you’re put in the hole for 30 to 60 days, but 20 to 40 years in a tiny room with no contact with anyone, no one to touch you, no one to speak to-- is torture.

“Against liberals who would see this torture as a sign that the system of mass incarceration is malfunctioning, La Fontaine insists:

“**W**e don’t have a broken system in America. It works very well and has been very effective for people that have property and that make money from the prison-industrial complex. Yet people that have been expendable are paying the price.”



Glimpsing the New World.

If Du Bois emphasized the economic centrality of slave labor, he nevertheless insisted that “the true significance of slavery” to the United States had more to do with the abolition of race as a structure of inequality: an abolition to which the working classes hold the key. A “strategic” class is thus not merely the class located closest to production, but also that which has an intrinsic knowledge—gleaned from everyday activity—of the inner functioning of the system as a totality (a knowledge which Du Bois showed to be military as well as social). It was precisely in an effort to celebrate this very same sort of informal, everyday knowledge and the political self-activity of the masses it generates, that C.L.R. James famously wrote in 1956 that “Every Cook Can Govern.”



In this day and age, when the economy is increasingly lumpenized, when an increasing proportion of Black Americans, not to mention Latinos, immigrants, and poor, are relegated to hustling to survive at the margin of the law—who could deny that it is these very same “unemployables” who are best able to grasp the totality of capitalism in the United States? And who among this sector understands the reality of the system better than today’s “ultimate exploited,” those deemed so uncontrollable and so expendable as to be locked away for 22 ½ hours a day in windowless 8 by 10 foot cells?

But this is not to say that those involved in the California hunger strikes do not embody some deep and troubling contradictions, that some of them might be white supremacist, sexist, homophobic, egoistic, and prone to violent behavior. The so-called “lumpen” has been, since Marx, denigrated as deviant, violent, corrupt, and as embodying all that is negative about the world we are attempting to bury. But while Marx was attempting to protect the working class from any association with the lumpen “mob,” later Marxists like C.L.R. James rightly argued that this duality, this contradiction between the old world and the new, is something which cuts right to the heart of the working class as well, explaining its potential to be either revolutionary or reactionary, and it is this contradiction that—in a more acute form—cuts to the heart of the caged “unemployables” as well.

Central among these contradictions in the United States is white supremacy, and here the concrete demands of the hunger strikers should not conceal the fact that their very actions call into question the racist logic of imprisonment. In fact, as Dylan Rodriguez recently argued, the very same gang certification and debriefing procedures that land inmates in the SHU, and which the striking inmates are protesting, exist to uphold the “logic of segregation” that underpins our society as a whole (“For the Hunger Strikers at Pelican Bay...” July 13th 2011). In other words, the “debriefing” process is a process of control that, under the guise of gang prevention, serves to uphold segregation and prevent joint struggles among white, Black, and Latino inmates. For La Fontaine, “It behooves the prison industrial complex to keep the system going by maintaining divisions,” and the guards often justify formal segregation by themselves planting rumors and stoking racial conflict: “They also tell white, black, brown people that others are up to something. Then when things get out of control, they create the SHU to control people.”

In their self-organization, the hunger strikers have already begun to rupture these structures of segregation. As Marilyn McMahon of the American Friends Services Committee, who has served to mediate between prisoners and state officials, has revealed, the 11-member leadership team heading up the strike comprises 4 major racial groups and a cross-

gang alliance. According to Molly Porzig of the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity coalition, "these prisoners are in solidarity with each other across hundreds of miles, in situations where basic communication is denied, and across racial lines often used to divide prisoners."

This cross-racial alliance is no mistake: as La Fontaine puts it, "After decades of prison manufactured racism prisoners have no choice." In other words, the very conditions demanded by the primitive accumulation system of mass incarceration have the effect of politicizing those who suffer under the weight of that system, and central to this process is overcoming racism, segregation, and institutionalized white supremacy:

Leaders, people who understand themselves and their history transcend racial lines. Prisoners in SHU have transcended that and are demanding human rights... The minute that people begin to think of the conditions of their confinement, the conditions that led the majority



of people to be in prison, they become revolutionary, they become leaders.

While noting that the racial unity within the Pelican Bay hunger strike is currently tactical, and that simply working together doesn't mean that those involved have necessarily abandoned their white supremacy, Ed Mead—a former political prisoner and currently editor of Prison Focus—nevertheless notes that “the level of oppression reaches a certain point in which people must work together. The prison is a microcosm of society but far more intense.” This pressure and this need to work together under more “intense” conditions has the potential to speed personal transformations. In other words, while the process of organizing for change in prison requires what are initially tactical alliances, such alliances have the potential to quickly become much more than merely tactical.

As La Fontaine puts it:

People that are alone in prison, that have only books to read and time to think become more in tune with who they are, they stop playing Crip, Blood, Aryan Brotherhood and instead say I am an African king, my heritage is that of Irish workers; when they recognize that, the minute they recognize that, they become revolutionary. The guards can't recognize that and say what the fuck, you are a prisoner. The prisoners talk to others, other prisoners may not be like them, but they say read this book, study this and people transform and then the guards see them as a threat.

Their uniform treatment by prison officials can provide the pressure necessary to generate unified consciousness. In the context of the Algerian Revolution, Frantz Fanon wrote of how active participation in the struggle could allow the lumpen to be "rehabilitated in their own eyes and in the eyes of history," shedding their reactionary ideological relics while embracing a new humanity, and while the jury remains out on the Pelican Bay hunger strike, this of course is the hope.



A "CONVICT RACE" ?

In his reflections on the 1993 Lucasville prison uprising, which successfully crafted inter-racial unity to a degree seldom seen before, a unity embodied in graffiti referring to the "Convict Race," Staughton Lynd asks a crucial question: "How, if at all, can this experience of prisoners overcoming racism be extrapolated? What is the relationship of prison resistance to the wider movement for social change?" But while Lynd correctly rejects the idea that white workers will simply volunteer to abandon their privileges, and while he recognizes the differences that separate prison experience from broader working-class experience, we feel that he nevertheless falls back too easily on the claim that "Workers become socialists in action, through experience." True, but the entire history of the U.S. working class is a testament to the fact that simply bringing workers together under the old slogan "Black



and white, unite and fight” will not itself eradicate the wages of whiteness, wages which Du Bois shows to be both material and psychological.

How far and how hard do white workers (or lumpens) need to be pushed in order to abandon white supremacy? Despite efforts by prison officials to stoke racial resentment, those risking their lives in the Pelican Bay SHU and elsewhere show us that imprisonment already provides a hard push, much harder than anything that white workers will experience on the outside (although Huey Newton hoped that the expansion of the condition of unemployability would force white workers to join their Black brethren in the struggle). We need to be careful then, not to overstate the implications of race relations in prison strikes for working-class relations outside the walls. Of course, white workers will abandon white supremacy if their lives absolutely depend on it, but what if their lives don't depend on it?

But more importantly than this, we believe that Lynd has the question backwards to begin with: the question is not what prison rebellions can teach us about fighting white supremacy outside (i.e. in the “real” world of the working class), but how these insurrections within the prison system themselves constitute a leading sector, a spearhead striking at the very heart of late capitalism in the U.S.

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(Photo of the Attica Prison Rebellion, September 1971)

Page 7: Art by Pete Collins, imprisoned at Bath Prison, Ontario, Canada

Page 10: Art by Rashid Johnson, imprisoned at Red Onion Prison in Virginia, in support of CA hunger strikers

Page 15: Georgia Prison Strike, by Gerald and Maas, nightslantern.ca